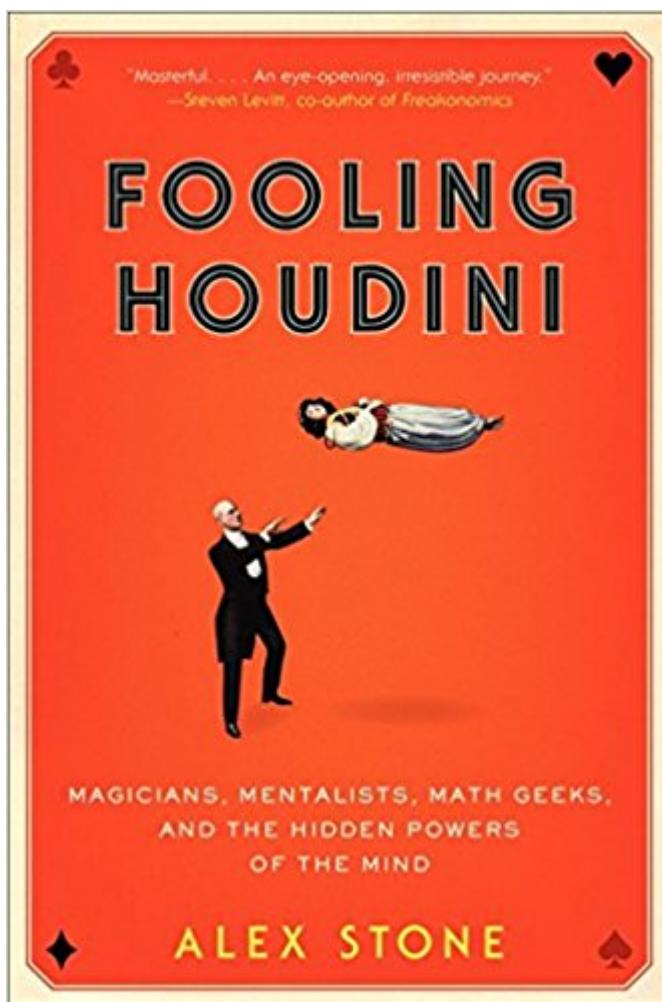


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Fooling Houdini: Magicians, Mentalists, Math Geeks, And The Hidden Powers Of The Mind



Synopsis

From the back rooms of New York City's age-old magic societies to cutting-edge psychology labs, three-card monte games on Canal Street to glossy Las Vegas casinos, Fooling Houdini recounts Alex Stone's quest to join the ranks of master magicians. As he navigates this quirky and occasionally hilarious subculture populated by brilliant eccentrics, Stone pulls back the curtain on a community shrouded in secrecy, fueled by obsession and brilliance, and organized around one overriding need: to prove one's worth by deceiving others. But his journey is more than a tale of tricks, gigs, and geeks. By investing some of the lesser-known corners of psychology, neuroscience, physics, history, and even crime, all through the lens of trickery and illusion, Fooling Houdini arrives at a host of startling revelations about how the mind works--and why, sometimes, it doesn't.

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Customer Reviews

Best Books of the Month, June 2012: Before reading this book, I thought magic was a little inane. The magicians of my memory wore capes and makeup. They pulled doves from their hats and deployed a lot of smoke. But in Fooling Houdini, Alex Stone reveals a world far deeper and fascinating than I ever imagined. After failing at the Magic Olympics in Stockholm, Stone gets serious about the art of illusion. He attends magic schools and seeks out one of the best "card mechanics" in the world. Along the way, he learns how criminal empires were built on age-old magic scams. He studies the art of mind-reading. And he explains how magicians exploit cognitive blind spots to make the impossible happen in public. He pursues every dark nook of the magic world in

pursuit of the ultimate goal. --A routine so mindboggling that it would fool other master magicians. Does he succeed? I'd tell you the answer, but that would ruin the magic. --Benjamin Moebius --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

"An enthralling journey into the inner world of magic. Alex Stone writes with a winning voice that you'll want to follow anywhere." (Joshua Foer, author of *Moonwalking with Einstein*) "Alex Stone's *Fooling Houdini* is a delight. In the physics Ph.D program at Columbia, he drops everything to pursue the murky world of magic. He writes with wit and scientific sharpness and grand humor. He immerses us in a fascinating world few have ever entered." (Buzz Bissinger, author of *Father's Day* and *Friday Night Lights*) "What I loved most about *Fooling Houdini* is the world it takes us into: these huddled cliques of obsessed magicians reinventing their art. . . . This book makes you want to do magic tricks, and convinces you just how hard it is to do them well." (Ira Glass, host of "This American Life") "Fooling Houdini is a totally smart and engrossing study of one of America's most misunderstood sub-cultures, and at the same time the story of one man's quest to probe the mysteries of magic, science, and where the two meet." (John Hodgman, author of *The Areas of My Expertise*) "Fooling Houdini is an eye-opening, irresistible journey into the world of magic. Stone has written a masterful story that is bursting with energy, inventiveness, and a sense of wonder on every page. I couldn't put it down!" (Steven Levitt, co-author of *Freakonomics*) "In a memoir studded with historical factoids, charming anecdotes and a variety of behind-the-curtain insider secrets to classic magic tricks, Stone serves as a winsome tour guide. . . . There's plenty of eye-opening knowledge on display. . . . Magically engrossing." (Kirkus)

This book operates on two levels. The first is the autobiography of a magician, telling a tale from being gonged off stage at the "Magic Olympics" through a rising obsession with the craft before rolling into his redemption. On a second level, it's a history of magic in the modern age (although there are occasional forays into more ancient history.) The author tells of the magicians that inspired him, some of whom he learned from personally and some were from the preceding generation, such as Dai Vernon, the magician who actually fooled Houdini. However, the book's title doesn't come from Vernon's feat with the Ambitious Card Trick, but is instead a more general statement about the challenge of tricking magicians -- an accomplishment a great

deal more prestigious than fooling a pod of eight year olds at little Timmy's birthday party. Stone was a science writer turned Physics graduate student, and so the science of magic and mentalism comes out frequently. However, this book is distinct from one such as

"Sleights of Mind" by Macknik & Martinez-Conde, which is focused entirely upon conveying the science of how magic tricks work (primarily neuroscience with a focus on how the sense organs and brain interact to a magician's advantage.) In truth, I expected this book to more along the lines of "Sleights of Mind." However, in a way, it's a good thing that it wasn't. Stone reviews the science that Macknik and Martinez-Conde drill down into enough so that it's a good review if one has read that book (I had) or an introduction if one hasn't. What Stone does a great deal more of is describing the perfection one's craft. Along the way he shows us a blind card handler with a preternatural capacity for tactile control of the deck, he takes us to clown college to improve showmanship, and he meets up with some street hustlers of the 3-card monte variety. Throughout the course of the book are ups and downs that maintain the tension. In fact, one chapter is actually entitled "It's Annoying and I Asked You to Stop," about the inevitable point at which a magician's obsession with improving his/her skills stops being cute to loved ones. There is also a chapter about Stone's [almost] being blackballed from the magic community for revealing secrets in a general readership magazine (I guess that's a muggle-mag?) An important part of the story is Stone's search for a Yoda, a wizened member of the magic community who can give him the deeper insight needed to fool a room of experts. He eventually finds said individual, but is not quickly adopted. (It has a hero's journey feel through this part.) I thought that the author did a good job of building an interesting story arc within a work of nonfiction. This increases the book's readability, particular if one has no particular interest in magic. One need not be knowledgeable about the discipline to find the story interesting and to learn some fascinating tidbits. If nothing else, one will learn how con men cull marks, so one can avoid falling prey to their potent psychology (though I expect the subset of readers of books and those tricked into gambling 3-card monte is probably not huge.) One area in which a reader might be dissatisfied is in the coverage given to mentalism and math-based tricks. The alliterative subtitle makes reference to "magicians, mentalists, and math geeks" but the bulk of the book is about close-up magic; mentalism and mathematical methods don't come in until the last few chapters. If you're expecting that

the coverage of those topics will be on par with that of close-up magic, this may not be the book for you. Still, while this was different than I expected, it didn't hurt my impression of the book. I enjoyed this book, and received some intriguing insights from it. I'd recommend it for those interested in magic and in particular the craft and science of it. Even if you aren't interested in magic, you might find the story of one man's development of his discipline to be worth reading.

Fooling Houdini: Magicians, Mentalists, Math Geeks, and the Hidden Powers of the Mind
This is the first time in many reads that I have taken "pen to paper" to share a review. I've been sitting on a beach reading *Fooling Houdini* and am struck by all that one does not know and have marveled at the lengths to which the impassioned go to flesh out knowledge. Alex Stone's passion seemingly stems from a public humiliation. While unfortunate for him, we benefit from his sharing the knowledge gained from his passion. While perhaps I found myself wondering whether Stone would "get a life" I was also struck by his intellect, curiosity, humility and honesty. These traits were revealed through an open voice that was not only entertaining but articulated complex principles in a way one could understand without the distraction of wondering "what did he say?". Stone enriched his story with relevant and fascinating detours through a surprisingly documented history of the skills he was honing. Who knew that the \$20 I lost in NYC while "playing" three card monte didn't just make me a sucker but placed me in a long, unbroken line of historical pawns upon which America was built. Along the way we meet neat characters of a rich and, to one another, well known world of card mechanics and other conjurers. In short, were this simply a book about a guy trying to become a magician, it might be lacking. This was a fascinating exploration of the historic underpinning, psychological and scientific bases for what I for one had viewed solely as entertainment. Moreover, Stone knows how to learn and provides a crash course in education; research, experimentation, mentorship and plain old tenacity all come into play in his effort.

Being someone who has dabbled in legerdemain since childhood, I found this book far more entertaining than I expected. Alex Stone has this provocative way of rambling through his experiences in a way so engaging, it just brings a smile to your face. The author was very concise in his way of looking at magic, his ordeals with the self imposed "protectors" of magical secrets; its foundations and most interestingly, the psychology of what makes it both intriguing and effective in a much broader perspective. I enjoyed it in an almost philosophical manner. Whether or not you're interested in magic, you will enjoy this lightly wandering and enjoyable read.

I bought this book on a whim, after reading an article in the NY Times by Alex Stone, and it was a great find. If you are a fan of books about the brain and how we perceive the world, this book is for you. The first part of the book is a bit slow, but it picks up quickly and pretty soon you are deep in to the world of magicians and mentalists. Stone profiles some truly amazing folks and provides history going back to the middle ages. A big thumbs up.

What child isn't beguiled by magic and what adult isn't intrigued by a great magic trick (and trying to decipher how their mind was fooled by the magician). Alex Stone grew up fascinated by magic and as an adult, he abandons his graduate physics studies to pursue his true passion of magic. Early on, Stone is embarrassed after his performance at the Olympics of Magic with a amateur display more like that of a magician at a child's birthday party. As Stone decides to get serious about his passion, he travels the country, taking various classes and meeting an eccentric cast of characters to hone his skills and performance technique. Stone broadens the story to focus on the origins of magic, the deep connection of magic to mathematics and the powers of the mind. This is a fun and entertaining read and while I do think there are some lulls in the storytelling, "Fooling Houdini" kept me quite interested. Ultimately, it reminded me quite a bit of Joshua Foer's "Moonwalking with Einstein", although I do think Foer was a better writer with a strong sense of humor.

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